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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the orientation program conducted for distance students at the University of Central Queensland in Queensland, Australia, and outlines the steps in developing and conducting such a program. Information is included on the rationale for the orientation program, program objectives, program design, including issues, location, staffing, timing, and evaluation; and student reaction, i.e., student participation rates and perceptions. A report on two surveys concludes that approximately 90 percent of the students participate in the program and that most students were satisfied with the program content; some suggestions were made to improve location and timing of orientation sessions.
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Designing an orientation program to prepare students for distance education study

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Introduction

The University of Central Queensland (UCQ) in Queensland, Australia has been conducting a well attended distance education student orientation program for a number of years. Charged with the design, organisation and participating in its delivery this experience provides many answers to those age old questions: HOW? WHEN? WHERE? WHY?

UCQ draws its 4500 distance education students from across Australia with the majority located within a 1000km radius of the principal campus in Rockhampton. Its distance education student orientation program is delivered at 13 different regional cities and towns throughout Queensland and at Sydney. A team of academic and administrative staff travel throughout the state conducting sessions at local learning centres over weekends and during the working week. Centre staff assist in the delivery of the program.

The rationale for an orientation program

When funding is readily available it would be quite easy for distance educators to use the argument that on campus students are provided with an orientation program which is considered necessary and this alone is justification for the offering of an off campus orientation program to distance education students.

Sceptics may counter this argument by suggesting that the on campus orientation is designed to provide the student with an opportunity to assimilate into the University environment, locate facilities and services available there and finalise enrolments, lecture timetables etc and that these issues are not relevant to the distance education student.

On the contrary a well designed and properly staffed off-campus orientation can achieve similar objectives ie develop an awareness of the learning environment of distance education students, help locate support facilities and resources, clarify enrolment issues and resolve concerns students may have about the system.

Additionally attrition studies have identified a number of institutionally controlled factors as influencing students decisions to withdraw from study. An orientation program is one way of addressing some of these factors ie assimilation, communication, identification, system clarification and coping skills.

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Program objectives

The primary objective of the off-campus orientation is to address institutional and where possible educational factors which have been identified as having a negative affect on the students learning objective ie that could cause the student not to fulfil all objectives. In essence it is an attempt to prepare students for distance education study.

Specific objectives should include:

1. provision of an introduction to the University which provides students with the opportunity to identify with and develop a sense of belonging to the institution
2. development of the students understanding of the distance mode of learning
3. provision of a forum for answering student questions
4. provision of an informal forum for students to meet
5. highlighting sources of assistance and support for students

Design issues

The design of the program is more than a matter of identifying where students are located and establishing how much funding is available. Purpose, location, staffing and timing are equally important in the design of a successful orientation program.

While mindful of the objectives of the program the design has to consider the following:

Alternative perspectives

The organisers of the program must first determine how much of the program will be devoted to addressing institutional matters and how much will be allocated to student identified issues. Once this has been established the question becomes one of the nature and type of institutional issues to be presented.

UCQ has chosen to address academic issues such as course planning/ advise, establishing the standards and commitment needed to be successful and study skills. Non academic issues include problem resolution, identification with staff, the university, local support and assistance available. There has been a deliberate intention to ensure orientation does not become an enrolment exercise or teaching activity.

From a student perspective considerable time is allocated for them to raise issues of concern. The program planners have taken care to ensure the sessions are not a continuous three hour lecture of what they deem to be important and have allocated times for students to have issues which concern them addressed in an open forum, small group discussion and through informal discussions with UCQ staff.

Location

This issue has the potential to impact on attendance. While an on-campus program provides the opportunity to meet numerous staff, identify with the institution, complete enrolments etc a similar exercise for distance students would put the program out of the reach of most because of the cost associated with attending. Travel costs (fares, accommodation, meals) use of leave entitlements and personal arrangements all contribute to the difficulty of attending an on-campus orientation.

The argument for a regional or local orientation can be extended when the two environments are considered. Consider the feelings of a new student, in an unfamiliar city entering a large campus for the first time. Some would be intimidated and many could experience difficulty locating the activity. The comfort level of students rises when they are in a familiar, non-threatening environment and meaningful participation increases.

Further the local environment is the one in which the student will undertake most of the learning.

Staffing

There are two issues to be considered. The make up of the group and the attributes/qualities of the staff selected.

The decision on group construction is one of whether academic or administrative or a mix of staff attend and the number from each sector. Experience has shown that the range of student issues and program content necessitates a mix. The number of staff needed is a function of the number of students attending. It has been proven that two staff, one administrative and one academic from the principal campus and a local learning centre liaison officer are sufficient to manage up to 70 students.

The major difficulty is in selecting the appropriate staff. The administrative person must have an affinity with tertiary education and in particular distance education as this person is expected to provide support to the academic staff member.

On the other hand the academic staff member/s requires a broad knowledge of University operations ie admission/enrolment procedures, examination procedures, library services etc and courses offered. This person should also have had considerable exposure to and understanding of the issues involved in instruction and learning at a distance.

All staff participating must have a warm friendly persona. It would be detrimental to use staff who through personality traits or presentation styles may cause student to be reserved and non participative.

Timing

Issues for consideration are whether the program is conducted before or after the commencement of semester, whether weekends are used and the time of day the sessions are held.

The advantages of conducting the program before semester are timely action on student concerns, provision of a starting point and an opportunity to resolve problems before the commencement of study. If the program is held after semester commences there is a danger of it becoming a teaching exercise, study is disrupted, students have little opportunity to digest and action the information provided and any alterations to programs etc will result in loss of effort and delays in commencing study of appropriate units.

Use of weekends provides students who have to travel considerable distance, require child care etc, with the opportunity to attend. In Australia some people work on Saturday mornings and Sunday morning is for religious worship hence conducting an orientation at these two times is avoided.

During the working week evening sessions commence around 7pm in order that students have enough time to leave work have a meal and be organised for the session. Earlier starting times have created difficulties for many students.

Refinement

Care must be exercised in choosing what is to be evaluated. While staff performance is a concern the primary focus should be on whether the program is meeting student needs. The process adopted at UCQ uses feedback from students and participating staff.

Student reaction to the program is sought through a formal questionnaire which the students are asked to complete before departing an orientation session. A debriefing of participating staff is also held immediately after the full program has been completed. This approach ensures that the staff assessment of the program as well as those informal student comments which do not necessarily make it onto the questionnaire are passed back to the evaluators. Comment from learning centre staff is also sought.

Program validity, value to the student and reason for attendance are the primary issues of the evaluation.

Student Reaction

The survey information for this paper has been gathered over a four year period (1989 - 1992).

Participation Rates

Approximately 1000 UCQ distance education students attend orientation each year. Of these students 900 are new which represents around 60% of the new student enrolment at the time the orientation sessions are conducted. The percentage of new students who attend an orientation session is very high given that interstate students have access problems.

The predominant users attending orientation, which comprise approximately 90% of total attendees are new undergraduate students. Attendance by discipline also reflects the total number of students enrolled in each undergraduate program with the exception being those students enrolled in the Bachelor of Health Science (Nursing) program who invariably have a higher percentage attendance rate than students in other undergraduate programs.

While there has been an increase in new students with exposure to tertiary studies prior to enrolling with the University of Central Queensland (38% in 1990 to 53% in 1992), there has been a decrease in the number of students who have had previous distance education experience. This figure has fallen from 69% in 1989 to 23% in 1992.

Perceptions

Two questionnaires were used to gather this data. The 1989-1991 questionnaire comprised mainly closed questions with only limited opportunities for students to express their point of view. The 1992 questionnaire gave students considerable scope to comment on the orientation program and what they expected from the program.

Following analysis of the response to the 1989 questionnaire, changes were introduced in the 1990 program in order to incorporate student suggestions for improvement and to focus the program more directly on what students indicated they required. These included:

- clarification of academic problems
- clarification of administrative/enrolment problems
- time to acquaint themselves with fellow students
- time to acquaint themselves with university staff

With the exception of "time to acquaint themselves with University staff" students were generally satisfied with the manner in which the program addressed the issues that they felt were important and the vast majority of students did not recommend changes to the program. Changes recommended related to such things as location and timing of sessions rather than the content with no major shortcoming in the content being identified by students.

Changes made to the 1990 program had no impact on the substantial gap between the amount of interaction students wanted with academic staff and their perception of the amount they were receiving at orientation sessions. It was not until further changes were made to the program format in 1991 that students were satisfied with this aspect of the program as only 2% of students expressed dissatisfaction in 1991.

The more open ended survey in 1992 reinforced earlier beliefs that the predominant reason for students attending orientation was "to seek information" with secondary reasons being "making contact with staff and other students" and "meeting other students". Asked what was the most useful aspect of the program the students responded "everything", "study skills", "clarification of academic problems" and "identification with UCQ".

When suggestions for improving the program were sought 67% of students did not comment and a further 9% said they were pleased with the current format. Fifteen (6.4%) of the 233 students completing the survey felt that organisation and/or timing could be improved and this was the only suggestion with any real student support. Sixty percent of student said the program had provided them with new information with only 23% saying they learnt nothing new (most of this group were continuing students). Seventeen did not respond to the question.

Finally, students were asked if they thought the program would benefit them as a distance education student and only 5.2% said "no" with a further 27.9% not responding to the question or replying "no comment". Of the remaining 68.8%, some 30.5% benefited by way of information extension, a further 14.6% benefiting through reinforcement and 9.4% benefiting by way of increased motivation.

Concluding thought

The one major dilemma is that some students want more from the program than the University is able to provide. This group would like elements of teaching advice included in the program. The University has resisted this on the basis that orientation is a time for preparation and assimilation rather than instruction.

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